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IDEAS

ONE WORD DESCRIBES TRUMP

A century ago, a German sociologist explained precisely how the president thinks about the world.

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What exactly is Donald Trump doing?

Since taking office, he has reduced his administration's effectiveness by appointing to essential agencies people who lack the skills and temperaments to do their jobs. His mass firings have emptied the civil service of many of its most capable employees. He has defied laws that he could just as easily have followed (for instance, refusing to notify Congress 30 days before firing inspectors general). He has disregarded the plain language of statutes, court rulings, and the Constitution, setting up confrontations with the courts that he is likely to lose. Few of his orders have gone through a policy-development process that helps ensure they won't fail or backfire—thus ensuring that many will.

In foreign affairs, he has antagonized Denmark, Canada, and Panama; renamed the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America"; and unveiled a Gaz-a-Lago plan. For good measure, he named himself chair of the Kennedy Center, as if he didn't have enough to do.

Even those who expected the worst from his reelection (I among them) expected more rationality. Today, it is clear that what has happened since January 20 is not just a change of administration but a change of regime—a change, that is, in our system of government. But a change to what?

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There is an answer, and it is not classic authoritarianism—nor is it autocracy, oligarchy, or monarchy. Trump is installing what scholars call patrimonialism. Understanding patrimonialism is essential to defeating it. In particular, it has a fatal weakness that Democrats and Trump's other opponents should make their primary and relentless line of attack.

Last year, two professors published a book that deserves wide attention. In *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*, Stephen E. Hanson, a government professor at the College of William & Mary, and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, a political scientist at UC Irvine, resurface a mostly forgotten term whose lineage dates back to Max Weber, the German sociologist best known for his seminal book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Weber wondered how the leaders of states derive legitimacy, the claim to rule rightfully. He thought it boiled down to two choices. One is rational legal bureaucracy (or "bureaucratic proceduralism"), a system in which legitimacy is bestowed by institutions following certain rules and norms. That is the American system we all took for granted until January 20. Presidents, federal officials, and military inductees swear an oath to the Constitution, not to a person.

The other source of legitimacy is more ancient, more common, and more intuitive—"the default form of rule in the premodern world," Hanson and Kopstein write. "The state was little more than the extended 'household' of the ruler; it did not exist as a separate entity." Weber called this system "patrimonialism" because rulers claimed to be the symbolic father of the people—the state's personification and protector.

Exactly that idea was implied in Trump's own chilling declaration: "He who saves his Country does not violate any Law."

In his day, Weber thought that patrimonialism was on its way to history's scrap heap. Its personalized style of rule was too inexpert and capricious to manage the complex economies and military machines that, after Bismarck, became the hallmarks of modern statehood. Unfortunately, he was wrong.

Patrimonialism is less a form of government than a style of governing. It is not defined by institutions or rules; rather, it can infect all forms of government by replacing impersonal, formal lines of authority with personalized, informal ones. Based on individual loyalty and connections, and on rewarding friends and punishing enemies (real or perceived), it can be found not just in states but also among tribes, street gangs, and criminal organizations.

In its governmental guise, patrimonialism is distinguished by running the state as if it were the leader's personal property or family business. It can be found in many countries, but its main contemporary exponent—at least until January 20, 2025—has been Vladimir Putin. In the first portion of his rule, he ran the Russian state as a personal racket. State bureaucracies and private companies continued to operate, but the real governing principle was *Stay on Vladimir Vladimirovich's good side … or else.*

Seeking to make the world safe for gangsterism, Putin used propaganda, subversion, and other forms of influence to spread the model abroad. Over time, the patrimonial model gained ground in states as diverse as Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and India. Gradually (as my colleague Anne Applebaum has documented), those states coordinated in something like a syndicate of crime families—"working out problems," write Hanson and Kopstein in their book, "divvying up the spoils, sometimes quarreling, but helping each other when needed. Putin in this scheme occupied the position of the *capo di tutti capi*, the boss of bosses."

Until now. Move over, President Putin.

To understand the source of Trump's hold on power, and its main weakness, one needs to understand what patrimonialism is not. It is not the same as classic authoritarianism. And it is not necessarily antidemocratic.

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Patrimonialism's antithesis is not democracy; it is bureaucracy, or, more precisely, bureaucratic proceduralism. Classic authoritarianism—the sort of system seen in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union—is often heavily bureaucratized. When authoritarians take power, they consolidate their rule by creating structures such as secret police, propaganda agencies, special military units, and politburos. They legitimate their power with legal codes and constitutions. Orwell understood the bureaucratic aspect of classic authoritarianism; in *1984,* Oceania's ministries of Truth (propaganda), Peace (war), and Love (state security) are the regime's most characteristic (and terrifying) features.

By contrast, patrimonialism is suspicious of bureaucracies; after all, to exactly whom are they loyal? They might acquire powers of their own, and their rules and processes might prove obstructive. People with expertise, experience, and distinguished résumés are likewise suspect because they bring independent standing and authority. So patrimonialism stocks the government with nonentities and hacks, or, when possible, it bypasses bureaucratic procedures altogether. When security officials at USAID tried to protect classified information from Elon Musk's uncleared DOGE team, they were simply put on leave. Patrimonial governance's aversion to formalism makes it capricious and even whimsical—such as when the leader announces, out of nowhere, the renaming of international bodies of water or the U.S. occupation of Gaza.

Also unlike classic authoritarianism, patrimonialism can coexist with democracy, at least for a while. As Hanson and Kopstein write, "A leader may be democratically elected but still seek to legitimate his or her rule patrimonially. Increasingly, elected leaders have sought to demolish bureaucratic administrative states ('deep states,' they sometimes call them) built up over decades in favor of rule by family and friends." India's Narendra Modi, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Trump himself are examples of

elected patrimonial leaders—and ones who have achieved substantial popular support and democratic legitimacy. Once in power, patrimonialists love to clothe themselves in the rhetoric of democracy, like Elon Musk justifying his team's extralegal actions as making the "unelected fourth unconstitutional branch of government" be "responsive to the people."

Nonetheless, as patrimonialism snips the government's procedural tendons, it weakens and eventually cripples the state. Over time, as it seeks to embed itself, many leaders attempt the transition to full-blown authoritarianism. "Electoral processes and constitutional norms cannot survive long when patrimonial legitimacy begins to dominate the political arena," write Hanson and Kopstein.

Even if authoritarianism is averted, the damage that patrimonialism does to state capacity is severe. Governments' best people leave or are driven out. Agencies' missions are distorted and their practices corrupted. Procedures and norms are abandoned and forgotten. Civil servants, contractors, grantees, corporations, and the public are corrupted by the habit of currying favor.

To say, then, that Trump lacks the temperament or attention span to be a dictator offers little comfort. He is patrimonialism's perfect organism. He recognizes no distinction between what is public and private, legal and illegal, formal and informal, national and personal. "He can't tell the difference between his own personal interest and the national interest, if he even understands what the national interest is," John Bolton, who served as national security adviser in Trump's first term, told *The Bulwark*. As one prominent Republican politician recently told me, understanding Trump is simple: "If you're his friend, he's your friend. If you're not his friend, he's not your friend." This official chose to be Trump's friend. Otherwise, he said, his job would be nearly impossible for the next four years.

Patrimonialism explains what might otherwise be puzzling. Every policy the president cares about is his personal property. Trump dropped the federal prosecution of New York City Mayor Eric Adams because a pliant big-city mayor is a useful thing to have. He broke with 50 years of practice by treating the Justice Department as "his personal law firm." He treats the enforcement of duly enacted statutes as optional—and, what's

more, claims the authority to indemnify lawbreakers. He halted proceedings against January 6 thugs and rioters because they are on his side. His agencies screen hires for loyalty to him rather than to the Constitution.

In Trump's world, federal agencies are shut down on his say-so without so much as a nod to Congress. Henchmen with no statutory authority barge into agencies and take them over. A loyalist who had only ever managed two small nonprofits is chosen for the hardest management job in government. Conflicts of interest are tolerated if not outright blessed. Prosecutors and inspectors general are fired for doing their job. Thousands of civil servants are converted to employment at the president's will. Former officials' security protection is withdrawn because they are disloyal. The presidency itself is treated as a business opportunity.

Yet when Max Weber saw patrimonialism as obsolete in the era of the modern state, he was not daydreaming. As Hanson and Kopstein note, "Patrimonial regimes couldn't compete militarily or economically with states led by expert bureaucracies." They still can't. Patrimonialism suffers from two inherent and in many cases fatal shortcomings.

The first is incompetence. "The arbitrary whims of the ruler and his personal coterie continually interfere with the regular functioning of state agencies," write Hanson and Kopstein. Patrimonial regimes are "simply awful at managing any complex problem of modern governance," they write. "At best they supply poorly functioning institutions, and at worst they actively prey on the economy." Already, the administration seems bent on debilitating as much of the government as it can. Some examples of incompetence, such as the reported firing of staffers who safeguard nuclear weapons and prevent bird flu, would be laughable if they were not so alarming.

Eventually, incompetence makes itself evident to the voting public without needing too much help from the opposition. But helping the public understand patrimonialism's other, even greater vulnerability—corruption—requires relentless messaging.

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Patrimonialism is corrupt by definition, because its reason for being is to exploit the state for gain—political, personal, and financial. At every turn, it is at war with the rules and institutions that impede rigging, robbing, and gutting the state. We know what to expect from Trump's second term. As Larry Diamond of Stanford University's Hoover Institution said in a recent podcast, "I think we are going to see an absolutely staggering orgy of corruption and crony capitalism in the next four years unlike anything we've seen since the late 19th century, the Gilded Age." (Francis Fukuyama, also of Stanford, replied: "It's going to be a lot worse than the Gilded Age.")

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They weren't wrong. "In the first three weeks of his administration," reported the Associated Press, "President Donald Trump has moved with brazen haste to dismantle the federal government's public integrity guardrails that he frequently tested during his first term but now seems intent on removing entirely." The pace was eye-watering. Over the course of just a couple of days in February, for example, the Trump administration:

- â€¢gutted enforcement of statutes against foreign influence, thus, according to the former White House counsel Bob Bauer, reducing "the legal risks faced by companies like the Trump Organization that interact with government officials to advance favorable conditions for business interests shared with foreign governments, and foreign-connected partners and counterparties";

- â€¢suspended enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, further reducing, wrote Bauer, "legal risks and issues posed for the Trump Organization's engagements with government officials both at home and abroad";

- â€¢fired, without cause, the head of the government's ethics office, a supposedly independent agency overseeing anti-corruption rules and financial disclosures for the executive branch;

- â€¢fired, also without cause, the inspector general of USAID after the official reported that outlay freezes and staff cuts had left oversight "largely nonoperational."

By that point, Trump had already eviscerated conflict-of-interest rules, creating, according to Bauer, "ample space for foreign governments, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to work directly with the Trump Organization or an affiliate within the framework of existing agreements in ways highly beneficial to its business interests." He had fired inspectors general in 19 agencies, without cause and probably illegally. One could go on—and Trump will.

Corruption is patrimonialism's Achilles' heel because the public understands it and doesn't like it. It is not an abstraction like "democracy" or "Constitution" or "rule of law." It conveys that the government is being run for *them*, not for *you*. The most dire threat that Putin faced was Alexei Navalny's

"ceaseless crusade" against corruption, which might have brought down the regime had Putin not arranged for Navalny's death in prison. In Poland, the liberal opposition booted the patrimonialist Law and Justice Party from power in 2023 with an anti-corruption narrative.

In the United States, anyone seeking evidence of the power of anti-corruption need look no further than Republicans' attacks against Jim Wright and Hillary Clinton. In Clinton's case, Republicans and Trump bootstrapped a minor procedural violation (the use of a private server for classified emails) into a world-class scandal. Trump and his allies continually lambasted her as the most corrupt candidate ever. Sheer repetition convinced many voters that where there was smoke, there must be fire.

Even more on point is Newt Gingrich's successful campaign to bring down Democratic House Speaker Jim Wright—a campaign that ended Wright's career, launched Gingrich's, and paved the way for the Republicans' takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994. In the late 1980s, Wright was a congressional titan and Gingrich an eccentric backbencher, but Gingrich had a plan. "I'll just keep pounding and pounding on his [Wright's] ethics," he said in 1987. "There comes a point where it comes together and the media takes off on it, or it dies." Gingrich used ethics complaints and relentless public messaging (not necessarily fact-based) to brand Wright and, by implication, the Democrats as corrupt. "In virtually every speech and every interview, he attacked Wright," John M. Barry wrote in *Politico*. "He told his audiences to write letters to the editor of their local newspapers, to call in on talk shows, to demand answers from their local members of Congress in public meetings. In his travels, he also sought out local political and investigative reporters or editorial writers, and urged them to look into Wright. And Gingrich routinely repeated, 'Jim Wright is the most corrupt speaker in the 20th century.'"

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Today, Gingrich's campaign offers the Democrats a playbook. If they want to undermine Trump's support, this model suggests that they should pursue a relentless, strategic, and thematic campaign branding Trump as America's most corrupt

president. Almost every development could provide fodder for such attacks, which would connect corruption not with generalities like the rule of law but with kitchen-table issues. Higher prices? Crony capitalism! Cuts to popular programs? Payoffs for Trump's fat-cat clients! Tax cuts? A greedy raid on Social Security!

The best objection to this approach (perhaps the only objection, at this point) is that the corruption charge won't stick against Trump. After all, the public has been hearing about his corruption for years and has priced it in or just doesn't care. Besides, the public believes that all politicians are corrupt anyway.

But driving a strategic, coordinated message against Trump's corruption is exactly what the opposition has *not* done. Instead, it has reacted to whatever is in the day's news. By responding to daily fire drills and running in circles, it has failed to drive any message at all.

Also, it is not quite true that the public already knows Trump is corrupt and doesn't care. Rather, because he seems so unfiltered, he benefits from a perception that he is authentic in a way that other politicians are not, and because he infuriates elites, he enjoys a reputation for being on the side of the common person. Breaking those perceptions can determine whether his approval rating is above 50 percent or below 40 percent, and politically speaking, that is all the difference in the world.

Do the Democrats need a positive message of their own? Sure, they should do that work. But right now, when they are out of power and Trump is the *capo di tutti capi*, the history of patrimonial rule suggests that their most effective approach will be hammering home the message that he is corrupt. One thing is certain: He will give them plenty to work with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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